

149th Emancipation Celebration Festival

July 29th – 30th, 2011

Grey Roots Museum & Archives and Harrison Park, Owen Sound

Nikita Johnston

Emancipation Festival 9th Annual Speakers Forum



The evening was cool and clear on Friday July 29th and stars filled the sky above Grey Roots Museum and Archives, the venue for the 9th Annual Speakers Forum, the opening event of the 149th Emancipation Celebration Festival. Award-winning Anthony Sherwood Productions provided the evening's entertainment, staging two short plays on two important but little-known historical figures, William Hall and Mary Ann Shadd. Celebrations were not diminished by a tumultuous year which saw the reworking of the Festival committee, including a new Chairman, Blaine Courtney. The weekend-long event began with a well-attended evening filled with presentations and musical

performances.

Courtney gave a brief but emotional speech, in which he thanked both old and new committee members for all their dedication and hard work, and reminded the audience that “if we get emotional it is because it deserves to be presented that way.” Courtney spoke of how important community support is for the continued success of the Festival, and noted that the committee has responded to feedback and refocused the event in order to create a more family-friendly atmosphere. Courtney thanked Grey Roots for its continued support. Petal Furness, the Heritage Interpretation Supervisor for Grey Roots, in turn thanked the Emancipation Festival Committee, remarking on the importance of Black History within our area's culture.

Kevin Eccles (Mayor of West Grey and former Grey County Warden) and his wife were among the attendees for the evening's two performances. Eccles gave thanks to the committee and brought wishes



**Kevin Eccles,
Mayor of West Grey**



Owen Sound Mayor,
Deborah Haswell

of success on behalf of the County, himself and his wife. He promised to continue his support of both cultural and heritage activities such as the Emancipation Celebration Festival as he seeks the Liberal nomination to run as MPP for Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound in this fall's provincial election.

Owen Sound Mayor Deborah Haswell was also present for the festivities. She brought greetings from the City and made note of her pride in the wonderful diversity of Owen Sound's heritage. Haswell also spoke of how important events like this are, "for ourselves, for our kids, and for the older folks," and of how thrilled she is that

the festival has continued to thrive for 149 years and is "looking forward to the 150th."



Chairman of the Emancipation
Committee Blaine Courtney and
Barry Penhale

An ever-gracious "friend of the Festival", Barry Penhale, acted as MC for the evening, introducing both plays: *The Life of William Hall*, and *The Mary Ann Shadd Story*. The two productions were written and directed by Anthony Sherwood, a well-known Canadian producer, director, actor and writer with a career spanning 30 years of stage, television and movie acting. He is also a recipient of the Martin Luther King Achievement Award. Sherwood was accompanied by a number of talented young actors from St. Edmund Campion and Fletcher Meadow Secondary Schools. The supporting cast, made up of Dominic Amiel, Cyriisa Chong, Shayna Lindo and Anthony Accardi, were wonderfully entertaining in their roles in the two productions. The first play, *The Life of William Hall*, was one of sharing stories, and dealt with the themes of what it means to be a hero; the importance of friendship; and women's rights, all while recounting some of the life history of William Hall.

"Good friends are like pure gold...the more you have the wealthier you are"

- Anthony Sherwood in his role as William Hall

Hall, a native of Nova Scotia, was the second Canadian and first person of African descent to receive a Victoria Cross, the highest Medal of Honour in the British Empire, for his services in the Royal Navy in 1857, in which only he and one other soldier survived a battle of 450 British



Sherwood (center) and company (l-r) Dominic Amiel,
Anthony Accardi, Shayna Lindo, and Cyriisa Chong in
The Life of William Hall.

officers against 30,000 sepoys. In 2008 the Minister of the Environment declared William Hall to be a National Historic Person of Canada.

Janie Cooper-Wilson spoke briefly during the intermission between the two performances, extending her congratulations to the new Festival Board for their work on “an event that is so dear to our hearts.” Wilson discussed her most recent book, *Echoes in the Hills: My Eighteen-Month Search for John Brown’s Legacy*, launched in June (copies of which are available at Grey Roots). The book introduces another Black History hero, John Brown, a radical abolitionist, who in 1859 led a group of men on what has come to be known as the Harpers Ferry Raid. It was a mission in which, for 36 hours, a small band of men held the entire South at bay. Cooper-Wilson refers to Brown as the “Blackest white man who died for our ancestors.” In her book she recounts little-known facts about the event, and delves even further into the life of John Brown from 1855 until his death in 1859, noting that “the web of intrigue that he wove stretched across half the United States and into our Northern settlements.” Cooper-Wilson, a native of Collingwood, Ontario, is an accomplished artist, who for the past two decades has devoted herself to the promotion and preservation of African-Canadian History in Ontario, and has been an active participant in the Emancipation Festival for many years.



Janie Cooper-Wilson



Mary Ann Shadd c. 1800s
Library and Archives Canada

Following the intermission, Sherwood and Company put on their second performance of the evening, *The Mary Ann Shadd Story*, the title role being excellently portrayed by Shayna Lindo. The play recounted some of the earliest accomplishments of Mary Ann Shadd, “a woman with a list of firsts,” who became the first Black woman editor in North America; the first woman admitted to Howard University’s Law School; the first woman to complete her law degree in the United States, and the first Black woman allowed to vote in a Federal election in Washington D.C. During her life Shadd took on the roles of abolitionist, teacher, editor, publisher, suffragette, and lawyer, as well as being a wife and mother. Despite continued antipathy against her colour and her sex, she stayed true to her ideals and beliefs.

The evening concluded with the performers holding a Q & A session for audience members. The main discussion centered upon the importance of not only educating students, but also the administrators and teachers who educate North American youth, about individuals such as

William Hall and Mary Ann Shadd, and other Black historical figures who are often left out of the history books.

149th Emancipation Celebration Picnic



All ages were welcome to the Emancipation Picnic held at Harrison Park, Owen Sound

of the Emancipation quilt. Face painting was also provided by the Weitendorf sisters (Erin from Grey Roots, and Lisa from Owen Sound Tourism).

The smells of Jerk Chicken and other Caribbean fare filled the air as families settled themselves in the picnic area to partake of the delicious food being served at the event. With the accompaniment of music, the day was a sensory affair of sights, sounds, and smells that all acted as reminders of the theme of the event. Draws provided additional entertainment for the attendees, with family-themed prizes for the oldest person at the Festival, as well as for the attendee who had travelled the furthest (some visitors came from as far away as Africa). A marketplace provided ample opportunity for the shopping-inclined to walk away with some unique treasures, with stalls offering books, jewelry and arts and crafts.

Next Year's 150th Emancipation Celebration

With this year's events having come to a close, we are reminded that for something as important as our diverse cultural heritage, a weekend, let alone a month, is too short a time to celebrate our African-Canadian history here in Grey County. Yet hopes and aspirations seem to be high for next year's 150th Emancipation Celebration, already being planned by Blaine Courtney and the

The sun shone brightly on July 30th, the day of the 149th Emancipation Celebration Picnic, but the crowds were not deterred by the heat, with over 500 people in attendance. As promised by Blaine Courtney and the Festival Committee, the day proved to be one in which the themes of family and community were paramount. A kids' tent provided a number of activities as well as respite from the heat for the smaller attendants of the Festival, and a quilting station allowed children to try making a piece



Visitors viewing a display on the "Descendants of Solomon Levi Earll and Sarah Ann Woods"

rest of the Emancipation Festival Committee. In the words of Fitzroy Dixon, “we look ahead with utmost anticipation.”¹

¹ *Emancipation Day: Celebrating Freedom in Canada* (Natasha L. Henry, Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010 p. 17)